



Labor and Public Employees Committee Hearing

Tuesday, March 15th, 2022

Testimony in Support of Raised Senate Bill No. 422, AN ACT CONCERNING THE
ESSENTIAL WORKERS COVID-19 ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Helen McAlinden

President and CEO

Homes with Hope

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Senator Kushner, Representative Porter, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, thank you for hearing my testimony today in support of Raised Senate Bill No. 422, An Act Concerning the Essential Workers COVID-19 Assistance Program. My name is Helen McAlinden, and I am a resident and voter in the Town of Fairfield, CT. I am also the President and CEO of *Homes with Hope*, a nonprofit social service agency located in Westport, CT. *Homes with Hope* is dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in Fairfield County. If it had not been for our fearless and dedicated staff, *Homes with Hope* could not have continued to serve the community of Fairfield County during the pandemic. Our dedicated workers continue to work daily to ensure that those we serve, including the most vulnerable members of our state, are kept safe during these unprecedented times.

I am an active member of the statewide Reaching Home Campaign to prevent and end homelessness in Connecticut, a member of the Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, and the Co-Chair of Opening Doors Fairfield County Advocacy Committee. I, alongside many other partners in the state, know that safe, affordable, and permanent housing is the only solution to homelessness. When our state's residents have stable housing, their economic and health outcomes improve. During COVID-19, the need for permanent housing for all Connecticut residents was made even more critical. To achieve our goals, we need your support of this important Bill.

**I respectfully request that the committee support the Raised Senate Bill No. 422,
AN ACT CONCERNING THE ESSENTIAL WORKERS COVID-19 ASSISTANCE
PROGRAM**

In Connecticut, we have a homeless response system that *can* end homelessness. However, to end homelessness we need front-line staff. We need financially sound homeless and housing organizations to make having a safe, stable, and affordable home a reality for thousands of Connecticut residents. Today, we have the opportunity to provide critical funding to support our frontline workers as they fight tirelessly to prevent individuals and families from falling into homelessness and to find homes for those individuals and families who currently do not have a home.

Our homeless response system itself is near crisis. Our front-line staff are not paid a living wage and, in some cases, find themselves on the brink of homelessness or



homeless themselves. Some of our organizations have challenges hiring, retaining, and training their staff because the wages are so low.

During the pandemic, our front-line workers played an essential public health role. Their successes included decompressing the shelters, holding vaccine clinics, and matching individuals and families to housing. Our front-line workers kept people and our communities safe.

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Unlike other systems, Connecticut's homeless response has never been fully funded. Today, we can pass legislation to support the front-line staff, ensuring Connecticut improves the homeless response system we have created together and build upon its many successes. That is how we will end homelessness.

Did you know?

- Connecticut's homeless response system is funded at less than 50% by any government source. Other nonprofits depend on the state for 100% of their funding. Because of this disparity, the model of increasing funding with COLAs on state contracts does not provide the same support for our sector as it does for other sectors.
- Inflation, along with the rising costs of health insurance, rent, heat and fuel make it impossible for homeless service organizations to hire and retain qualified staff. The average turnover rate for nonprofits in 2021 was 18% as people fled direct services positions for less dangerous and less stressful jobs. For those who stay, poverty wages mean that many front-line staff rely on government support like Medicaid and rental assistance. Most individuals fulfilling these essential roles are disproportionately people of color.
- COVID has strained Connecticut's homeless response system and in some cases brought it to near or to a crisis point. We learned during the pandemic that our homeless response system provides essential public health services keeping people and our communities' safe, by coordinating isolation, testing, and vaccinations.
- Frontline workers, including those that support homeless shelters, have been critical in combating the spread of the COVID virus and helping to keep our CT communities healthy and safe. We are asking for legislative action to include homeless response workers in the Connecticut Essential Workers COVID-19 Assistance Program.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, these essential workers have stepped up to a new challenge, working on the frontlines of the emergency response to care for those most vulnerable to the virus. Whether coordinating testing



and vaccines, providing shelter services, isolation, and quarantine space, or moving people into housing, the contributions of the frontline staff in the homeless response system have been vital and essential. We also know that frontline staff and those fulfilling essential roles throughout the pandemic are disproportionately people of color.

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- At Homes with Hope's Emergency Homeless Shelters and in every other shelter in CT our staff, provide, daily services to the most vulnerable in CT. When others had the luxury of working from home our staff came to work daily to make sure that the homeless were housed and kept safe in a very changing world. They were afraid like everyone else but they came to work and continued to serve the most vulnerable with respect and dignity. They are also our front-line heroes like nurses, doctors, hospital staff, police, fire personnel, etc. It is very important that the homeless response workers are included in the CT Essential Workers COVID-19 Assistance Program.
- Homelessness is solvable. Connecticut can make homelessness a rare, brief, and one-time experience by investing in what works: housing, supportive services, and the people and infrastructure that support our most vulnerable residents.

To put things in perspective, currently, in Westport, a studio's fair market rent cost is \$1,520, one-bedroom is \$1,855, two-bedroom is \$2,230, and three-bedroom is \$2,757. Not alone is this outrageous, but even at those outlandish prices, there is no affordable housing available. When stock becomes available, apartments are quickly renting above the fair market rental amount. Think of this: the hourly wage for a full-time worker to afford a studio apartment is \$31.66, a one-bedroom is \$38.66, a two-bedroom is \$46.46, and a three-bedroom is \$57.44. Connecticut's minimum wage is \$13.00 per hour. Even with two minimum wage jobs, most can't afford to live here in Fairfield County, much less Westport, where many of their jobs and natural supports exist. As a nonprofit, Homes with Hope is proud to be able to pay its employees significantly more than minimum wage, but it is still not enough for all that we ask of our front-line workers, and not enough to be able to afford to live in Fairfield County.

Thank you to the committee for the opportunity to present this testimony, and for your hard work making important and life-saving decisions as we look to shape Connecticut's future beyond the pandemic.

Sincerely,

Helen McAlinden